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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the predicted differences in the effectiveness of social approval and disapproval cues. Three hypotheses were tested to determine what the effect on communication is if the source of the cue is a peer, family member, or society and what the response will be when a message advocates a position discrepant from the initial position of the receiver. The subjects chosen for the study were 228 students in the beginning communication theory course at the University of Connecticut. The results of the study were not significant, and the support for the predicted effectiveness of social approval and disapproval cues was mixed. (RB)

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ORIGIN AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL APPROVAL AND SOCIAL DISAPPROVAL CUES IN PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

by

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RATIONALE

The Problem

The study of the effects of fear-arousing cues within messages on the reception and processing of those messages has long held interest for communication scholars. Miller (1963) and Miller and Hewgill (1966) have summarized the results of a considerable portion of past literature. As is evident in a survey of past literature, most of the messages have involved threat of physical injury. Powell and Miller (1967) attempted to move from the threat of physical consequences to that of social consequences of behavior. Using the topic of donating blood to the American Red Cross without pay versus selling one's blood to a private collecting agency, they found support for the prediction that under the condition of high initial source credibility, the message containing social disapproval cues was more effective than the message containing social approval cues. With no source attributed to the message, social disapproval cues again led to greater effectiveness. When the message was attributed to a source, with low credibility, there was no significant difference in the effectiveness of the two types of cues.

McCroskey and Wright (1971) found no differences in the achieved effectiveness of the two types of cues. However, in neither the Powell and Miller (1967) nor the McCroskey and Wright (1971) studies was the question of the origin of the cues considered. To equate the statement "society disapproves of those who demand money for a ping of life saving blood" with "college students disapprove of fellow class members who demand money for a ping of life saving blood" without some verification, may be an oversimplification. If one is to experience psychological distress (taken here to be similar to the distress suffered when threatened with physical consequences) there must be some degree

of psychological proximity between the source of the threat and the threatened party.

In this study there were considered to be three levels of psychological proximity: peers; the family; and society. A peer was taken to be the close friends and acquaintances of the receiver. Peers were considered to be closer to the subject than family for the basic reason that family can represent a very diverse group that has little formal function while peers are a central part of the life space of the individual. In this view a member of a very close-knit family would view family members as peers. Therefore, the basic reason for considering peers to be the closest social distance is that they are almost always a central feature of the life space of the individual while family members can vary greatly in their importance and placement in the life space. General societal groups (e.g., American Medical Association, religious leaders) were taken to be farther from the subject's central functioning because they rarely act on the individual in that stated form and thus are abstract entities. That is, one is not affected by the A.M.A., but he may be affected by his family physician. Therefore, general groups were taken to represent the greatest social distance in this study.

Powell (1965) found that with physical threats, cues were most effective when directed at something personal and meaningful to the receiver such as the family rather than toward general referents such as the society. It was felt this importance of a personal contact should apply when the threat is social as well as when it is physical. In this study, it was felt that threats of social disapproval should be most effective when invoked by a source close to the receiver--one that would have an obvious opportunity to make disapproval a social reality. When the source had a less personal contact with the receiver it was felt this would be akin to the lower credibility conditions of

the Powell and Miller (1967) or McCroskey and Wright (1971) studies. Though the hypothesis was not supported in those studies the rationale was still superior to any present alternative. In addition, the discrepancy between the message and the receiver position is less in the social approval condition than in the social disapproval condition. That is, the receiver is more likely to accept the promise of social approval from a low or moderate credibility source than he is to accept the threat of social disapproval.

Hypotheses

The above literature lead to the following hypotheses:

H_1: The source of the social approval or disapproval cue will interact with the type of cue so that: (a) when the source of the cue is a peer, a disapproval cue will generate more attitude change than an approval cue; (b) when the source of the cue is the family or society, an approval cue will generate more attitude change than a disapproval cue.

H_2: When a message advocates a position discrepant from the receiver's initial position, a message containing social approval cues will be rated more favorably (clearer, better organized, and more lenient) than a message containing social disapproval cues.

H_3: When a message advocates a position discrepant from the initial position of the receiver, a message containing social approval cues will lead to higher ratings of source credibility (Safety, Qualification, and Dynamism) than a message containing social disapproval cues.

METHOD

Dependent Measures

To assess pretest and post-test attitudes on the topic (Free Birth Control Products) the following five bipolar scales were used: Good-Bad, Nice-Awful, Fair-Unfair, Valuable-Worthless, and Positive-Negative. Scale ends were randomly reflected.

To assess perceived source credibility, four scales were used to measure each of the three dimensions isolated by Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1966). The scales used for the Safety dimension were: Safe-Unsafe, Just-Unjust, Friendly-Unfriendly, and Honest-Dishonest. To assess the Qualification dimension, the scales were: Qualified-Unqualified, Trained-Untrained, Experienced-Inexperienced, and Skilled-Unskilled. The Dynamism dimension was assessed through the scales: Aggressive-Meek, Emphatic-Hesitant, Bold-Timid, and Active-Passive. As with the attitude scales, the ends were reflected. The four scales within each dimension were summed to obtain a single score for each aspect of credibility.

Message evaluation was assessed through the scales Organized-Disorganized, Logical-Illogical, Systematic-Chaotic (Organization), Meaningful-Meaningless, Unambiguous-Ambiguous, Precise-Vague, Clear-Unclear (Clarity), Severe-Lenient, Strong-Weak, and Hard-Soft (Potency).

Subjects

The experimental subjects were 228 students in the beginning communication theory course at the University of Connecticut. The subjects were rotationally assigned to the six experimental conditions.

Messages

The general design involved development of six parallel messages. Ten passages in the approximately 400 word messages were systematically manipulated to generate a set of three messages containing only social approval cues and three messages containing only social disapproval cues. In each of the approval and the disapproval cases, one of the three messages attributed the cues to the peers of the receiver, one attributed the cues to families similar to that of

the receiver, and one attributed the cues to social and civic groups which are national in scope.

Procedures

All of the materials used in this study were written. The subjects received a test booklet containing: (1) pretest; (2) experimental message; (3) message evaluation scales; (4) attitude post-test; and (5) source credibility scales.

The booklet contained one page of instructions and was self-administering.

Attitude change was measured as pretest score minus post-test score. A positive result indicated change in the direction advocated in the message. All other scores were summed so that a higher score reflected a more favorable view.

Data Analysis

The design of the study included two factors: source of cues and social approval or disapproval cues. Data analysis was through a 2 x 3 analysis of variance for each dimension (Winer, 1971). The $p < .05$ criterion was used to judge significance of results.

RESULTS

Attitude Change

It was predicted that with a peer source the social disapproval cues would be more effective than social approval cues. With family or society sources the social approval cues were predicted to be more effective than the social disapproval cues. As Table 1 indicates, the results are in the direction predicted; however, they fall short of the magnitude of change needed to reach statistical significance.

It was also predicted that when the source of the cues was either the family or society, the social approval cues would be more effective than social disapproval cues. Again the direction of the data is correct but the level falls short of statistical significance. The first hypothesis predicts an interaction between the source of the cue and the type of cue. While the pattern is correct, the results are short of statistical significance when tested with analysis of variance.

Because the direction of the data was consistent with the hypotheses, it was decided after the anova to look at direction only. Table 4 contains the sign test (Siegel, 1956) data. That analysis minimizes the effects of a few very large changers who add greatly to the variance in the anova test. This analysis has been used and justified by other researchers (e.g., Elms and Janis, 1965).

As Table 4 displays, the predicted difference for peer influence did not occur. In both conditions the direction of change was significant. Though data is slightly better for social disapproval than social approval cues the significance levels vary only slightly (Approval $z = 1.70$, $p < .045$; Disapproval $z = 1.86$, $p < .032$). For family as the cue source the data clearly supports the hypothesis. While the predicted social approval cue led to significant attitude change in the direction hypothesized ($z = 2.50$, $p < .007$) the social disapproval cues led to nonsignificant change in the opposite direction ($z = 0.94$, $p < .17$). When society was the cue source there was also superiority for the social approval cues. The approval cues gained significant change in the direction advocated ($z = 2.55$, $p < .007$) while the disapproval cue gained nonsignificant support in the same direction ($z = 0.94$, $p < .18$).

Message Rating

Hypothesis 2 indicated that the message containing social approval cues would be rated more favorably than the message containing social disapproval cues. Table 2 data indicates that this hypothesis was not supported. The only difference reaching significance was the source of the cue on rated clarity of the message. The family message was rated lower than the other two messages resulting in the significant F (3.22, df = 2/222, $p < .05$).

Source Credibility

The third hypothesis predicted higher ratings of credibility for social approval cues than for social disapproval cues. The data does not support any finding of differences in ratings of source credibility.

DISCUSSION

The principle interest of this study was in the relationship between the source of social approval and disapproval cues and subsequent attitude change on a topic of personal relevance to the receiver. The prediction of an interaction between the source of the cue and the type of cue was suggested by previous research in the area of fear appeals and social threats. The data generated on this prediction was excellent in terms of direction but weak in terms of total amount of change. This led to mixed support for the main hypothesis.

While the analysis of variance indicated only that the direction of the data was good, analysis through the sign test provided support at a highly significant level. The specific interaction could not be tested statistically in this manner but at least adequate directional support was found.

This data would strongly suggest that unless attempting to influence a peer, promises of social support would be much more likely to gain acceptance

of the position advocated than would threats of social punishment. It would appear that threat of social punishment is a major influence variable only in the case of the peer group. This group also has the greatest likelihood of being able to fulfill such a threat, therefore it is probably viewed as more meaningful.

The result of this study and the Wilson (1974) study suggest that with no source credibility manipulation, endogenous elements of the message basically determine credibility ratings. When the construction of the message is controlled so that only peripheral elements are different across the messages, source credibility will be determined by the main, and identical, elements of those messages.

The finding of similar ratings for the messages, in spite of the hypothesized differences, suggests that the receivers were able to evaluate the messages independent of the source of the message. This also suggests that the college students can maintain an open mind and evaluate various aspects of a message independently. The primary content of all six messages was a series of statements supporting the thesis that unlimited access to birth control products was neither necessary nor desirable for society. If the audience was able to cognitively separate the source of the cues from the rest of the message the results expected would be identical to those obtained.

Summary

This study finds mixed support for the predicted differences in the effectiveness of social approval and disapproval cues. While the analysis of variance test yielded nonsignificant differences in the predicted directions, the sign test yielded highly significant results.

It was suggested that source credibility was determined by the basic information in the message rather than peripheral elements in that message. The basic information in the six messages was identical, only the source of the social approval and disapproval cues was manipulated. This involved changing only 10 sentences in a 400 word message.

The rating of the messages was similar for all six conditions.

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Table 1. Attitude change scores

Type of cue		Source of cue		
		Peer	Family	Society
Social Approval	$\bar{x}$	1.21	1.45	1.21
	s.d.	3.35	2.90	3.26
Social Disapproval	$\bar{x}$	2.00	0.47	0.34
	s.d.	3.94	3.67	3.64

Table 2. Mean ratings of the experimental messages

		Source of cue		
		Peer	Family	Society
Clarity*	Soc. App.	19.08	16.84	19.63
	Soc. Disapp.	18.82	18.97	20.40
Organization**	Soc. App.	15.03	13.50	14.66
	Soc. Disapp.	13.60	15.18	16.29
Potency**	Soc. App.	14.42	14.53	15.53
	Soc. Disapp.	15.16	13.47	15.82

*A higher score indicates a more favorable rating. The potential range was 4-28.

**The potential range was 3-21.

Table 3. Mean ratings on source credibility

		Source of cue		
		Peer	Family	Society
Safety*	Soc. App.	17.00	16.21	17.26
	Soc. Disapp.	17.16	17.66	16.84
Qualification*	Soc. App.	18.53	17.37	18.21
	Soc. Disapp.	18.45	18.05	18.82
Dynamism*	Soc. App.	19.76	20.82	20.71
	Soc. Disapp.	20.03	19.42	22.00

*A higher score indicates a more favorable attitude. The potential range was 4-28.

Table 4. Change score data for all conditions

Type of cue		Source of cue: Peer	Family	Society
	+*	19	18	20
Soc. App.	0	10	15	12
	-	9	5	6
	+	20	11	16
Soc. Disapp.	0	9	10	11
	-	9	17	11

*+ means change in the direction advocated in the message.